

# I know nothing about Assange: Trump

AG will make a determination on the case, says President on the charges against WikiLeaks founder

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WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump declared that "I know nothing about WikiLeaks" after its founder Julian Assange was hauled out of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London to face charges, a stark contrast to how candidate Trump showered praise on Mr. Assange's organisation night after night during the final weeks of the 2016 presidential campaign.

Asked about Thursday's arrest, Mr. Trump said at the White House: "It's not my thing. I know there is something having to do with Julian Assange. I've been seeing what's happened with Assange and that will be a determination, I would imagine, mostly by the Attorney General, who's doing an excellent job. So, he'll be making a determination. I know nothing really about him." "It's not my deal in life."

Mr. Trump had cheered on the release of Clinton campaign emails by WikiLeaks in 2016. On the same October day that the "Access Hollywood" tape emerged, revealing that Mr. Trump had bragged in 2005 about groping women, WikiLeaks began releasing damaging



**Raising objections:** Supporters of Julian Assange protesting against his arrest, near the British embassy in Berlin. •REUTERS

emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta.

Mr. Trump and his allies, facing a tough battle in the campaign's final month, seized on the illegal dumps and weaponised them.

"WikiLeaks, I love WikiLeaks," Mr. Trump said in Pennsylvania. "This WikiLeaks is like a treasure trove," Mr. Trump said in Michigan. "Boy, I love reading WikiLeaks," he said in Ohio.

All told, Mr. Trump extolled WikiLeaks more than 100 times, and a poster of Mr. Assange hung backstage at the Republican's debate

war room. At no point from a rally stage did Mr. Trump express any misgivings about how WikiLeaks obtained the emails from the Clinton campaign or about the accusations of stealing sensitive U.S. government information, which led to the charges against Mr. Assange on Thursday.

Mr. Assange for years has been under U.S. Justice Department scrutiny for WikiLeaks' role in publishing thousands of government secrets. He was an important figure in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe, as investigators examined

## Don't extradite him: Corbyn

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
LONDON

Britain's Labour Party leader said the government should oppose the extradition of Julian Assange to the United States. Jeremy Corbyn said in a tweet that the U.S. is trying to extradite Mr. Assange because he exposed "evidence of atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan."

how WikiLeaks obtained emails that were stolen from Democratic groups.

When asked about Mr. Assange in 2017, Mr. Trump said he did not "support or unsupport" WikiLeaks' move to release hacked emails and that he would not be involved in any decision for the U.S. government to arrest Mr. Assange.

"I am not involved in that decision," whether or not to arrest Assange," Mr. Trump told then, "but if they want to do it, it's OK with me."

The Justice Department now has charged Mr. Assange with taking part in a

## Aide arrested in Ecuador

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
QUITO

A collaborator of Julian Assange was arrested on Thursday in Ecuador while trying to flee to Japan, Interior Minister Paula Romo said. She did not identify the person.

Channel Telemazonas identified him as Ola Bini, a software developer, but did not name its source.

computer hacking conspiracy, accusing him of scheming with Chelsea Manning, a former Army intelligence analyst, to break a password for a classified government computer.

The single charge of computer intrusion conspiracy carries up to five years in prison, though the Justice Department can add additional charges depending on the evidence it gathers. Ms. Manning was ordered jailed last month for refusing to testify before a grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia, suggesting that prosecutors are still at work.

# 20 killed in Quetta blast

48 injured in attack that appears to have targeted Hazaras

MEHMAL SARFRAZ  
LAHORE

At least 20 people were killed and 48 injured when a blast hit the Hazarganji market in Quetta, Pakistan, on Friday.

Nine people from the Hazara community and one Frontier Corps soldier were among the dead. Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted that he was deeply saddened by the attack. "I have asked for an immediate inquiry & increased security for the people. Prayers go to the families of the victims & for early recovery of the injured."

At the site of the blast, DIG Quetta Abdul Razzaq Cheema told the media that every day, people from the Hazara community come to this market from Hazara Town to buy groceries. Police and Frontier Corps personnel escort them and take them back as well. On Friday, there were 11 vehicles and 55 people in that convoy. To a question whether the Hazara community members were the targets, Mr. Cheema said that while the Hazaras have been targeted in the past, this market place has people from other ethnic communities as well.



**Looking for clues:** Members of the bomb disposal unit surveying the site of the blast in Quetta on Friday. •REUTERS

According to the police, the explosive was hidden inside a potato sack at a vegetable shop, while Balochistan Home Minister Ziaullah Langove said in a press conference that it was a suicide attack. Mr. Langove added that the attack did not target any specific community.

The Hazara community in Quetta has been a target of terrorist attacks for more than a decade.

Advocate Jalila Haider, a woman lawyer from the community, believes that while people from other communities died in the attack as well, the real target was the Hazaras. "I am so disappointed and hurt right now. The Army chief assured us [Hazaras] that our

community will be safe after the last attack. This attack challenges his promise as well," Ms. Haider told *The Hindu*.

Sarooop Ijaz, a lawyer who works for the Human Rights Watch in Pakistan, told *The Hindu* that the attack highlights the need to take prompt, effective and rights-respecting measures by bringing the perpetrators to justice. "Many of the victims are from the already persecuted Hazaras. Prime Minister Imran Khan has rightly expressed the commitment that militant outfits targeting civilians and security officials will be held accountable and this attack should be treated as a test case," added Mr. Ijaz.

# In Sudan, a strongman falls but the regime he built stays

After deposing President Bashir, the Army takes over government 'for two years'

STANLEY JOHNY

When anti-government protests in Sudan spread across the country demanding the resignation of President Omar al-Bashir, he dismissed them with disdain. "Rats go back to their holes," he said in January. Mr. Bashir initially used force to quell the protests, killing dozens, but the public anger only grew over the weeks. As demonstrations went stronger, the Sudanese Army stepped in, removing Mr. Bashir from power and taking control of the government on Thursday. As soon as Mr. Bashir was ousted, Defence Minister Awad Ibn Ouf was sworn in as the head of the military council that will rule the country for two years till elections are held.



**Huge swell:** Protesters raising slogans against the military rulers ahead of the Friday prayers in Khartoum, Sudan. •REUTERS

a camp in Sudan. The U.S. listed Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1993 and

## NEWS ANALYSIS

later imposed sanctions on the country.

When Mr. Turabi started challenging him, Mr. Bashir ordered his arrest. When it became clear that he could not end the two decades-long insurgency in southern Sudan by force and amid mounting global pressure, Mr. Bashir entered into a peace agreement with the Sudan People's Liberation Army, providing the South autonomy for six years.

The southerners would eventually break away from Sudan and form their own country. In Darfur, an impoverished region in western Sudan, when people protested demanding rights, Mr.

Bashir unleashed militias against them in 2003 that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. The Darfur conflict led to his conviction at the International Criminal Court for genocide.

But despite these internal challenges and his international isolation, Mr. Bashir survived all these years as President. The discovery of oil in Sudan in the late 1990s helped him establish himself as an economic moderniser. In recent years, he warmed up to the West and presented himself as a bulwark against terrorism in Africa. But still, he couldn't quell the mounting public anger amid an economy that was rocked by the country's split.

## Economic woes

After South Sudan seceded with three-fourth of the country's oil fields in July

2011, Sudan fell into an economic downturn. Inflation soared to 73% by late 2018 in a country where more than 40% of the population live in poverty.

The rapid rise in inflation has brought down the living standards of the middle class, who were at the forefront of the anti-Bashir protests. The country also plunged into fuel and cash shortage. The protest began in late December against soaring prices of bread, but soon snowballed into a nation-wide agitation against Mr. Bashir's rule. On April 6, thousands of protesters marched to the gates of Mr. Bashir's home in the headquarters of the Army, setting the alarm bells ringing across the military establishment.

## What's next?

Like in Algeria where President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was removed early this month by the Army amid protests, in Sudan also the old regime remains powerful. At a critical moment, the establishment has stepped in to remove the President so that the system he built could survive.

Some protesters have rejected the Sudanese Army's takeover of government, saying that they want to topple the regime, not just the President. However, it remains to be seen whether they will sustain the protests against the Army or Gen. Ibn Ouf, the new ruler, would stabilise the country.

## Bashir won't be extradited military rulers

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
KHARTOUM

Sudan's ousted President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and war crimes, will not be extradited, the country's new military rulers said on Friday.

"The President is currently in custody," the head of the military council's political committee, Lieutenant General Omar Zain al-Abidin, told a news conference. "We as a military council will not deliver the President abroad during our period" in office, he said when asked about the ICC arrest warrant.

## Tensions rise as Algerians march anew

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
ALGIERS

Heavy police deployment and repeated volleys of water cannon didn't deter masses of Algerians from packing the streets of the capital on Friday, insisting that their revolution isn't over just because the President stepped down.

Protesters shouted "Authorities - Assassins!" and surrounded a water cannon truck. Most of the anger was focussed on the interim President, Abdelkader Bensalah.

"Bensalah, get out!" they shouted, as a river of people adorned in green, white and red Algerian flags wove through the city.

# Malaysia approves Chinese project after price is slashed

The East Coast Rail Link is expected to cost \$11 billion

ALEXANDRA STEVENSON  
BEIJING

China on Friday agreed to cut by a third the cost of a rail project in Malaysia, a move that seemed to acknowledge mounting international scepticism about its continent-spanning infrastructure programme.

Malaysian officials announced a new agreement with China Communications Construction Co., a state-owned company, that would allow the rail project to go forward, nearly a year after the Malaysian government suspended it.

The project, meant to connect ports on Malaysia's east and west coasts, is now expected to cost \$11 billion, roughly two-thirds of the most recent projected price tag of \$16 billion. The earlier estimates had caused consternation within Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's administration.

"This reduction will surely benefit Malaysia and lighten the burden on the coun-



The earlier estimates caused consternation within PM Mahathir Mohamad's govt.

try's financial position," Mr. Mahathir's office said on Friday. The project, known as the East Coast Rail Link, became a political lightning rod after Mr. Mahathir used its cost as an issue on his way to winning the election last year.

## Ambitious plan

China's Belt and Road Initiative, of which the Malaysian project is one element, is an ambitious plan spearheaded by Chinese President Xi Jinping to connect economies across Asia, Africa and Eu-

rope. But it has also become a symbol of the sometimes high cost of projects that China uses to bolster its influence abroad.

Some of the early Belt and Road projects have come under scrutiny. China brought in its own workers and provided engineering expertise, but its financial support often took the form of huge loans to local governments.

In recent months, Chinese officials have to some extent put the brakes on the initiative, amid allegations of overspending and corruption in countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

At a news conference on Friday at the Malaysian Embassy in Beijing, Daim Zaiduddin, a special envoy, confirmed the new agreement and said the savings from the new deal would be enough to build two more Petronas Twin Towers, a landmark in Kuala Lumpur. He said Mr. Mahathir would disclose more details on Monday. NYTIMES

## IN BRIEF



### Rajapaksa's brother returns to Sri Lanka

COLOMBO

Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa on Friday returned to the island nation and said he has taken necessary steps to renounce his U.S. citizenship to be able to contest the presidential polls later this year. The Former Defence Secretary is being promoted as the main candidate from the Rajapaksa camp to face the next presidential election later this year as Mr. Rajapaksa cannot constitutionally run for a third term. FTI

# Amid talks with U.S., Taliban declares start of spring offensive

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
KABUL

The Taliban announced on Friday the start of its spring offensive despite talking peace with the United States and ahead of a significant gathering of Afghans meant to discuss resolutions to the protracted war and an eventual withdrawal of American troops from the country.

The insurgents released a lengthy missive in five languages, including English, saying the fighting would continue while foreign forces remain in Afghanistan.

The announcement is something the militant group does every year, even though Taliban attacks nev-

er really ceased during the harsh winter months. The insurgents carry out daily attacks targeting Afghan security forces and NATO troops, and inflicting staggering casualties, including among civilians.

Most recently, a Taliban attack near the main U.S. air base in Afghanistan killed three Marines on Monday.

The Taliban now holds sway over half the country after a relentless 17-year war, America's longest.

Friday's announcement instructs the Taliban mujahideen, or holy warriors, to "launch jihadi operations with sincerity and pure intentions," strictly abiding by

the Taliban command structure.

It also urges fighters to avoid civilian casualties.

In Kabul, the Afghan High Peace Council, a government body created years ago to talk peace with anti-government forces, condemned the Taliban announcement, saying it brought into question the insurgents' sincerity in seeking a peaceful end to the war.

Atta-u-Rahman Saleim, a council deputy, told over the phone that it undermines the credibility of the Taliban. "They are insisting on war," he said. "We can see this every day."